

**AT-RISK YOUTH
STUDY**

PRELIMINARY REPORT

REPORT DIGEST

SEPTEMBER 14, 2005



STATE OF WASHINGTON

JOINT LEGISLATIVE AUDIT
AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

STUDY TEAM

Cynthia L. Forland
Deborah Frazier

LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR

Ruta Fanning

Copies of Final reports and Digests
are available on the JLARC website
at:

<http://jlarc.leg.wa.gov>

or contact

Joint Legislative Audit & Review
Committee
506 16th Avenue SE
Olympia, WA 98501-2323
(360) 786-5171
(360) 786-5180 FAX

This Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) study builds on recent work of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) analyzing the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention programs for at-risk youth *nationally*. This study focuses on programs that have been implemented by local jurisdictions *in Washington* whose proven benefits in improving **child welfare** and reducing **juvenile crime** are greater than their costs. In addition, the study considers options for providing incentives to stimulate local government investment in such programs.

LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

Through a survey of local jurisdictions, JLARC found that of the three programs proven cost-effective nationally in improving **child welfare**, two have been locally implemented in Washington and served a total of 415 reported cases in 2004. Of the 14 programs proven cost-effective nationally in reducing **juvenile crime**, 10 have been locally implemented in Washington and served a total of 5,202 reported cases in 2004. These figures represent survey responses, so the total number of programs and cases statewide are likely higher than reported here.

Proven cost-effective **child welfare** programs were reported to serve fewer cases than programs demonstrated *not* to be cost-effective. The reverse is true for **juvenile offender** programs. Proven cost-effective juvenile offender programs were reported to serve far more cases than programs demonstrated *not* to be cost-effective.

The vast majority of reported funding for locally implemented proven cost-effective **child welfare** programs came from a combination of county and “other” funds. There was greater variation in reported funding patterns for locally implemented proven cost-effective **juvenile offender** programs. Diversion programs with services, which served over half of the reported juvenile offender cases, were funded nearly equally by state and county dollars. Aggression Replacement Training and Functional Family Therapy programs, which together served over a quarter of the reported juvenile offender cases, were primarily funded by state dollars.

JLARC received only two outcome evaluations that have been performed of locally implemented programs in order to determine whether or not they have produced documented, measurable positive results.

LOCAL INCENTIVES

An interim JLARC report issued in December 2004 considered two possible mechanisms for encouraging local investment in proven cost-effective programs. Based on the respective benefit to state and local governments, either a **match rate** or **reimbursement** mechanism could be used to fund specific programs.

Pilot projects in both Washington and Illinois are underway for funding county-based juvenile offender programs with state incentive dollars. In addition, the state budget requires the Children's Administration to give priority to proven intervention models.

FINDINGS

At least 12 proven cost-effective programs that address child welfare and juvenile crime have been locally implemented in Washington. These programs served a reported total of 5,617 cases with a reported total of \$5.18 million in spending from federal, state, county, city, and “other” sources in 2004. In comparison, programs addressing child welfare and juvenile crime determined *not* to be cost-effective served a reported total of 1,528 cases with a reported total of \$2.67 million in spending from federal, state, county, and “other” sources in that same year. Once again, these figures represent survey responses, so the total number of cases and spending statewide are likely higher than reported here.

CONCLUSIONS

Research tells us that some prevention and early intervention programs for at-risk youth can provide taxpayers a return on their dollar. However, it must be recognized that we are still in the early stages of research into both the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention programs and the benefit-to-cost ratios of those programs. It should also be recognized that research into programs addressing juvenile crime is much further along than research into programs addressing child welfare.

As concluded by the Institute in their 2004 report, many currently funded prevention and early intervention programs in the state have not been rigorously evaluated. Given this fact, it is not surprising that more proven cost-effective programs have not been locally implemented in the state or that outcome evaluations have not been performed for a greater number of those programs that have been implemented locally.

To focus the investment of taxpayer dollars on proven cost-effective programs for at-risk youth, policymakers should consider the following three points:

- Rigorous research to expand the field of available proven cost-effective programs takes both time and money, whether the source of funding is public or private.
- Effective implementation of proven cost-effective programs requires up-front investments, which can be an even greater burden for local governments than for statewide agencies.
- In order to ensure that implemented programs work and produce more benefits than costs, there must be ongoing monitoring and evaluation of these programs, which adds to the costs of those programs.

Investing in proven cost-effective programs involves up-front and ongoing costs. However, the costs of investing in proven programs may still be less than current spending on unproven programs.

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that DSHS provide an annual report to the fiscal committees of the Legislature, itemizing the amount of spending on prevention and early intervention programs that the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has determined are either not cost-effective or for which a cost-benefit estimate cannot be made.